

Retired military officer calls fort's closure an economic debacle

By Robert Rice

Deseret News staff writer

Closing Fort Douglas would be an economic debacle, costing taxpayers \$1 million more than it now costs to operate the base, a retired military official told the Fort Douglas Task Force Friday.

Meanwhile, Fort Douglas officials still maintain they need every inch of the 65 acres of the 119-acre base to accommodate an Army Reserve unit that will stay at the facility if it closes.

The Commission on Base Realignment and Closure recommended Fort Douglas and nearly 90 other bases be shut down in a closure package to be considered by Congress, which must make a decision 45 legislative days after March 1.

The Fort Douglas Task Force, co-chaired by several Utah congressional delegates and Salt Lake Mayor Palmer DePaulis, is meeting to determine what to do with surplus land if or when the bases closes.

Increased costs from closing the base could arise from housing military personnel in more expensive office space off fort grounds, Maj. Gen. George Holm, of the Utah Military and Veterans Affairs Committee, told the task force.

The closure commission recommended that non-military reserve personnel at the base move off the base and lease office space in Salt Lake City.

Holm told the task force 121,000 square feet of office space are currently used by non-reserve workers at a cost of \$243,000 yearly. Housing them off the base in more expensive commercial space would cost \$1.3 million yearly, he said.

"If we're interested in economics, the post should remain the way it is," Holm said.

Rep. Wayne Owens, D-Utah, however, said it was "virtually certain" that Congress would approve the closure package, which must be approved or rejected as a whole.

Despite the figures Holm relied on, Owens said the fort's closure serves the larger purpose mandated by legislation of "streamlining the military delivery system."

The 96th Army Reserve Command, the major tenant at the fort, announced soon after the base was recommended for closure that they would retain 65 acres of the historic fort and stood by that figure at the task force meeting.

Maj. Gen. R.O. Christiansen, commander of the 96th ARCOM, said the base's need for space for training, storage and office space justifies retaining the 65 acres of the fort.

"It's just no small area that is required; it is a large area," Christiansen said.

University of Utah President Chase Peterson said the university could use the remainder of the land not used by the reserves and said the U. "believes that a reasonable compromise can be reached" regarding the amount of available land.

Fort Douglas land could be used as a residential campus, Peterson said, providing honor students the opportunity to share housing with U. faculty members. Also, some of the 174,000 square feet of off-campus office space rented by the U. could be moved on to the fort.

Other uses of fort land by the university include convenient day-care facilities, administrative office space and storage space, Peterson said.

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